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ABSTRACT

Four short, inexpensive films used in conjunction with specific poems provide the basis for individual lessons or a single unit whose theme explicates man and his relationship to other men. "Two Castles," a simple film depicting the foolhardiness of pride is recommended for use in teaching an introductory unit on poetry. "The Wall," a film presenting different men's reactions to obstacles, is suggested to accompany Frost's "Mending Wall." Norman McLaren's "Neighbors," an allegorical film on man's inhumanity to man, is suitable for use with several poems. The final film, "Vivre," a presentation of the horrors of war, is recommended because of the strong reactions which it elicits from student audiences. (DD)

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Using Film with Poetry: A Unit Approach

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English teachers these days do not have to be told that film is in; all of us seem to be very much aware of the impact film has both in and outside the classroom. The professional journals publish more and more articles about film and its use in the classroom. And new journals devoted exclusively to film are being published, thus adding to the resources that the English teacher has for acquiring background and know-how in using film in the classroom. Despite the growing "film sense" that English teachers are acquiring, many of us are quite often reluctant to use film as an integral part of our class repertoire. Teachers are sometimes put off by the "film buff's" approach; often the teacher feels that one has to have some special gift, insight, or line of jargon to handle film in the classroom. Mastery of the technical aspects of film and its use often functions as the obstacle that keeps teachers away from film use. Not knowing what pan shots are, being unfamiliar with booms, zooms, back-lights, lap dissolves, many teachers feel they would look silly employing a tool they cannot handle as expertly as they use other teaching tools. The only things one really needs to use film in the classroom are, first of all, the film, and, second, a projector and screen. Of course, one might add just a bit more, like a willingness to try something new, a desire to use some standard techniques in a different way, and some degree of imagination. But most good English teachers possess the last three qualities anyway.

There may be other more practical problems connected with film use in the classroom. The first may be cost; most films are expensive, right? Wrong. Well, to use a film, you must use a full period or the better part of a period. Wrong again. Many good films can be screened in fewer than twenty minutes of class time and can be rented for ten dollars or less. And when a film is

used in the context of all other genre, the results a teacher can achieve are worth the investment of time and money. But most English teachers know this already.

One of the questions that many teachers ask was the title of a recent article in *Media and Methods*: "What Do You Do When the Lights Go On?" The questions and the implications of this question are probably the most real problem for many teachers. Often one finds himself using a film much in the same way he used lots of other things—like a novel, a short story, or a poem. Maybe there may not be too much wrong with this, particularly when one works well with the other genre. Film, as we all know, is a medium of communication just as the other genre are. Yes, there are obvious differences between a poem and a short film, but the difference between the genre should not be the factor that makes a teacher stay with the one that is more comfortable, more easily used.

What follows here might serve as either an approach or as a springboard to many approaches in using film and poetry. What I have attempted to do is select films that are short and to relate these films to specific poems. Each film, together with the poems used with it, might function as a separate lesson or unit. The four films might also be related to a larger theme. The order in which the films and the poems is presented is one more of convenience than of thematic continuity, although there is some degree of sequence involved in the arrangement presented here. A statement about man and his relationship to other men grows as each film is discussed together with the poems.

In teaching a unit on poetry, particularly when the unit is an introductory one, teachers often select poems that are more simple in form and statement rather than those that are highly ambiguous, highly abstract. *Two Castles* is a very simple film; the content of the film is very explicit, very concrete. An animation done with line drawings, *Two Castles* depicts the efforts of one castle dweller to make war on his neighbor's castle. The lord of the first castle rides out several times to the cheers of his followers to awaken the seemingly deaf or ignorant lord of the neighboring castle. He pounds on the door; he rides against the castle; he

attacks with bow and arrow; he hurls a rock; finally, he uses a cannon to attack his apparently stupid foe. Of course, what he has been attacking is the crown of a giant who has obviously chosen to ignore the puny efforts of his neighboring antagonist. However, when the war-like castle dweller manages to arouse the sleeping giant, his earlier resolve is forgotten. He retreats to his own castle and the haste of his retreat and the force he uses in slamming shut his own castle door cause his castle to come crashing down around both himself and his followers. The film ends as the giant doffs his crown and strikes a mournful pose over the death of his neighbor.

Two Castles, although explicit and simple in presentation, contains a great deal worth thoughtful consideration. The images in the film are direct and fuse nicely to create a very powerful metaphoric statement. Stephen Crane's poem XXI, from *War is Kind*, works well as a verbal statement of the film's basic metaphor. In *Two Castles* the giant seems to have no "sense of obligation" to respond to his neighbor's shouts of "Sir, I exist." The giant does, however, feel obligated to have some sense of pity toward his neighbor's folly. Swift's "A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General" might also be an interesting poem to use with *Two Castles*. In the last stanza of the poem, Swift makes a statement that relates to the conclusion of the film.

> Let pride be taught by this rebuke,
> How very mean a thing's a Duke;
> From all his ill-got honours flung,
> Turn'd to that dirt from whence he sprung.

In a large sense, the film makes a strong statement about the stupidity of man in his efforts to make war upon his neighbor. The variety of leadership, particularly leadership that seeks to destroy both the free and ultimately the follower, is made to look ridiculous through the animation techniques employed in the film. What we see and what we hear creates a set of humorous images that provide an ironic statement. The absurdity of the warlike antagonist can be compared nicely with Shakespeare's "sad stories of the death of kings," from *King Richard II*. The brief soliloquy

appears in Ciardi's *How Does A Poem Mean*, p.970. The following lines might serve as a statement on the film's theme:

> Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
> To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks;
> Infusing him with self and vain conceit—

In using *Two Castles*, a teacher might want to show the film several times during one period. Since it is only two minutes long, one could re-run it three or four times without much difficulty. One might ask the students to focus on the visual images — the two hills separated by the valley, the size of the antagonist, the flags, banners, and weapons waving from the parapets, and the attacker's weapons. One could also call attention to the sound track and ask the students to consider how the sound affects the film's "message."

In many ways *The Wall* (Contemporary films, 4 min., color, $10.00 rental) is like *Two Castles*. An animation, its images are also very direct and explicit, as is the meaning of the film. A man out walking approaches a wall. After he examines it, he realizes that he cannot get over it, so he sits down on a nearby rock to rest. A second man appears, and the first watches the second struggle to get over the wall by pole vaulting, by climbing, by blasting a hole in it. After all fails, the second runs against the wall and smashes through it. The effort kills him, but he has managed to break a hole through it. The first man sees the hole, tips his hat to the dead man, and walks through the hole only to approach a second wall. He again sits down to wait for someone to come along to find a way through the second wall.

The Wall does say something about barriers, but more than that, the film deals with the contrasting attitudes that people have toward the obstacles that confront them. One of the interesting points raised by the film is the way in which the two characters respond to the wall. While one is content to sit and wait, the second must find a way. The ambiguity of the film lies in trying to discover which of the two is correct or right in his response to the barrier. Frost's "Mending Wall" contains two characters who have contrasting attitudes toward walls. One "needs must have it down,"

while the other says simply that "good fences make good neighbors." And, again, one might ask, which of the two is correct.

"Good fences," may, as Frost says, "make good neighbors." This thesis is, in part, explored in Norman McLaren's film *Neighbors* (Contemporary films, 10 minutes, color, $7.50 rental). *Neighbors* is, like *Two Castles* and *The Wall,* an allegorical film that explores the way man behaves when he desires something that he thinks he should possess exclusively. Done in human animation, the film opens as two neighbors greet each other as they sit down in front of their houses to read the paper. While they are sitting a flower sprouts between them. Both men examine the flower, take turns smelling it, and in turn, enjoy the fragrance and beauty of the flower. Each of the men declare that the flower belongs to him. However, neither is willing to give up his rights to the flower. Each wants to "own" the flower. One erects a fence which the other destroys. They take turns putting up and tearing down the fences which obviously do not work.

At this point the men attack each other, using the pickets from the fence first as swords and ultimately as clubs. The fight gains in momentum and fury until both men become monsters ravaging each others home, tearing and mauling each other until they kill each other. During the entire battle, the flower has been completely forgotten; the longer they fight the more they forget the cause of their hatred.

As each man lies dead, a grave forms over his body, the fence pickets become grave markers and crosses, and upon each man's grave sprouts a flower. The moral of the film is graphically illustrated in several languages as the film ends—"love your neighbor." *Neighbors* is a film that practically any high school student can react to. Used alone, it could serve to spark a lively discussion. One could explore ways in which each neighbor was alike. One could examine the way in which the neighbors changed in action and appearance. One could spend some time discussing the way in which concrete objects such as the newspapers, the pipes, the fences, the facades of the houses, and the flower were used.

Sara Henderson Hay's poem "The Builders" in *Reflections on a*

Gift of Watermelon Pickle, "Earth" by John Wheelock, Thomas Hardy's "According to the Mighty Working," Spender's "What I Expected," and St. Vincent Millay's "Epitaph for the Race of Man" might be used to form a brief unit of poetry to be used with *Neighbors*. Hay's "The Builders" is essentially a poem about the three pigs and the wolf. But more than that it is a poem whose essential meaning is conveyed in the attitude of the narrator or speaker in the poem. This same attitude of man toward man is very much a part of *Neighbors*, and the question of who is right? who is wrong? compares nicely in each piece. Just as "The Builders" serves to point to the ironies in human relationships, so also does Wheelock's "Earth." This poem reflects on man's intelligence in dealing with his fellow man. The two characters in *Neighbors* had to destroy each other, but why? Essentially, because their desires blinded their intelligence. In "Earth" the Martian astronomer concludes that the explosion of our planet could not have occurred had not the inhabitants been intelligent enough to have caused it to happen. And what has happened has come to be because man is so often unable to come to terms with the thing he seeks most, peace. In "According to the Mighty Working" Hardy indicates that peace may well be "outside perception's range," that possibly peace is only an "allurement" resembling the "spinner's wheel onfleeing." Spender's "What I Had Expected" serves to reinforce the meaning of the film. What the two men in the film might have looked forward to was a shared enjoyment of their flower. Of course what they discover is something quite opposite. More than sharing the pleasure, they should have expected that each man would not behave as he did. What they do not foresee is much like what Spender does not foresee:

> The lack of good to touch
> The fading of body and soul
> Like smoke before wind
> Corrupt, unsubstantial.

The film and Spender's poem function as a paradox, a contrast. What one might conclude from looking at both is that there may not be "some brightness to hold in trust,/ some final innocence to save from dust." "Epitaph for the Race of Man" by Edna St.

Vincent Millay could well function as the epitaph for the allegorical figures, "Most various man, cut down to spring no more," *in Neighbors*. St. Vincent Millay asks in the poem what power is it that has caused man to be destroyed. She answers her question with a simple, declarative, "I know." And the simplicity of her answer seems to point to the conclusion derived from the film: "poor scattered mouth" man brings himself to ruin and destruction.

Vivre (Contemporary, 8 minutes, black and white, $7.50 rental) is a stark and moving film created from newsreel clips photographed over a twenty year period. It picks up where *Neighbors* might leave off in that *Vivre* poses questions about what war and strife do to those unfortunate enough to be left living amidst the hell of war. There is no story to the film, nor is there any dialogue. All we perceive are visual images that appear as a montage punctuated by the crack of a rifle shot. In addition, the visual images are heightened by the repetition of *"De Profundis"* ("Out of the Depths") which is a funeral hymn. It may be that this film, like so much good poetry, invites more thought than discussion. However, one can be certain that students will have many strong reactions to *Vivre*.

Emily Dickinson's "I Like A Look of Agony" might provide a discussion point for *Vivre*. In the poem Dickinson states: "I like a look of agony,/because I know it's true." One might consider the truth of agony and its many "looks" in *Vivre*. One might also have the students read Shapiro's "Interlude III" and MacSweeney's "Carmel Point." Each poem probes the feelings of the narrator in terms of the death of an animal or insect. But, each poem also attempts to reconcile feelings toward both life and death. Students often ask why such things as are seen in *Vivre* continue to happen. They perceive the horror of war in terms of both death and life. And they question man's ignorance or marvel at his indifference. Dan Jaffe's short poem "The Forecast" has often served as a good response to the question of man's indifference. "We shall not be disturbed" says the narrator because we manage nicely to close out everything unpleasant. Another poem that may work well with *Vivre* is Eberhart's "The Fury of

Aerial Bombardment." In the poem we are told the God looks on "Shock-pried faces" and that man

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Also, Eberhart asks if man was "made stupid to see his own stupidity?/Is God by definition indifferent, beyond us all?" One other interesting poem that could help to draw discussion points together is Donald Hall's "The Body Politic," which offers the reader an argument against blind faith to a cause and against the pointlessness of war.

In his poem "The Place" Richard Eberhart points out

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In many ways Eberhart's conclusion about the writing of poetry says something about its teaching. There need not be a time or a place most suited for teaching poetry in our classrooms. We may do as Steve Dunning suggests— teach a poem as the occasion for teaching one arises. Essentially one might teach a film much the same way. Of course, one cannot reach into the cupboard and have both film and projector ready at any time. One usually has to plan in advance to use a film. However, one can find much in a film that can be the occasion for including other things, particularly a piece of poetry. Each of the four films discussed here is short enough and open-ended enough to allow for the inclusion of lots of poems, many more than I have included. Also, these are just four short films. The number of good short films probably runs to ten times four. If you use films and teach poetry, try both of them together. If you teach poetry, but have not used a film, get one, a good one. It might be that both you and your students will enjoy the film and poems a lot more.